

Seattle Public Schools funding challenges are about more than assignments

Originally published October 22, 2015 at 4:58 pm Updated October 23, 2015 at 9:43 am



Seattle Times illustration

The Seattle Public Schools recent flap about reassigning students because of lower-than-expected enrollments does not tell the whole story about the challenges of funding.

By [Seattle Times editorial board](#)

The Seattle Times

WHEN [Seattle parent Brian Jones plunked down \\$70,000](#) to keep a West Seattle teacher from being reassigned to another school, he said he wanted to shine a light on the poor job lawmakers and officials are doing at funding public schools.

That is not the whole story. While the Supreme Court has held the state in contempt with a \$100,000-a-day fine, the state has made significant progress toward fully funding

basic education. This year, lawmakers pumped an additional \$1.3 billion into K-12 education.

Those extra funds were intended to pay additional costs, such as all-day kindergarten, limiting class sizes from kindergarten to third grade, and teacher raises, as well as maintenance and supplies.

The flap came after Seattle Public Schools announced it was reassigning teachers because of miscalculated enrollments, which highlights an area where the school district could improve — better planning.

The state funds school districts based on student head count. This fall, 52,399 students enrolled in Seattle's 97 public schools — 675 fewer than the district projected. That meant more than \$4 million less in revenue from the state.

That is less than 1 percent of the more than \$474 million the district spends on teacher salaries.

The district's total budget has grown much faster than enrollment. The general-fund budget for this school year is \$753 million, a 9 percent increase compared with the previous year, even though enrollment remained virtually flat.

The district has hired about 100 new teachers this fall, in part to reduce class sizes in kindergarten through third grade, as required by the state. Also, some of the new money, including funds allocated for materials and supplies, went to covering the teacher raises, approved in the recent district contract negotiation.

The district is not eliminating staff positions because of lower-than-expected enrollment but instead is moving some teachers and staff to the schools with the most demand.

Parents are understandably irked when their kids' schools lose staff about a month into the school year, when students are just settling in. Some schools that lose teachers have to combine multiple classes or grade levels into one classroom.

Even though enrollment isn't as high as projected, many Seattle schools are still overcrowded and in need of more teachers or support staff.

The Legislature has a lot of work left to fix K-12 funding, besides just putting more money into the system. State lawmakers must tackle the difficult challenge of the state taking over paying for most of basic education from school-district levies.

While it's clear the state must put more money into education, it's also true that individual school districts must spend every dollar as effectively as possible — for the benefit of students.

Editorial board members are editorial page editor Kate Riley, Frank A. Blethen, Ryan Blethen, Brier Dudley, Mark Higgins, Jonathan Martin, Thanh Tan, Blanca Torres, William K. Blethen (emeritus) and Robert C. Blethen (emeritus).